

WORD FROM THE CLOISTERS

diary@thetablet.co.uk

Turning sorrow into meaning

THE FIRST phrase of Toni Morrison's first book, *Bluest Eye* (1970), is "Nuns go by as quiet as lust".

The Australian writer Michael McGirr tells us that Morrison, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist who died last week at the age of 88, thought deeply about the spiritual foundations of her craft. "If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning," Morrison wrote, "it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic."

Morrison spent a lifetime drawing poison from the wounds of black America. "She wrote as the heiress of a heavy fortune, the suffering of her family and people, and she invested that fortune in a profound search for truth, wisdom and healing," writes McGirr.

The Bluest Eye took five years to write and did not receive much attention. Morrison recalls the story of a beautiful girl who said that she had definite proof that God could not exist. The proof was that she had been praying for two years to have blue eyes and God had not answered her request. This was a turning point for Morrison. She knew at



once that it would have been a tragedy if God had changed the girl's eyes. The sorrow was that she could not see her own beauty.

BORN CHLOE Ardelia Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, the name "Toni" comes from Morrison's patron saint, Anthony of Padua. Her mother was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, but Morrison converted to Catholicism when she was 12 years old after being inspired by a Catholic cousin to whom she was very close.

McGirr tells us that Morrison loved the

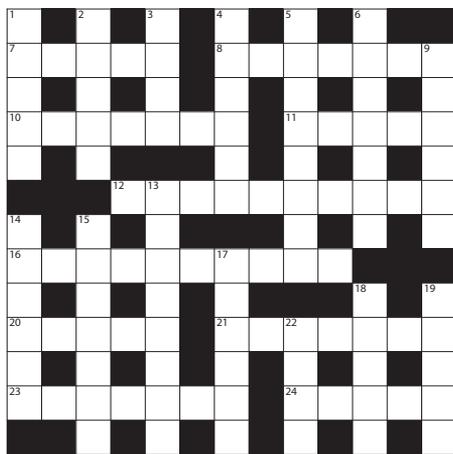
work of Flannery O'Connor, "who worked the same questions from the other side of a fence". In her 1996 essay, "God's Language", Morrison speaks of the challenge "to construct a work in which religious belief is central to the narrative itself ... I am alarmed at the debasement of religious language in literature; its cliché-ridden expression, its apathy, its refusal to refuel itself with non-market vocabulary ... its substitution of the terminology of popular psychology for philosophical clarity; its patriarchal triumphalism ... How can a novelist, in a land of plenty, render undeserved, limitless love, the 'one that passeth all understanding' without summoning the consumer pleasure of a lotto win? How to invoke paradise in an age of theme parks?"

Morrison came to shape her own spirituality, but in 2015 she told an interviewer: "I might be easily seduced to go back to church because I like the controversy as well as the beauty of this particular Pope Francis."

Schoolteacher and former priest McGirr has a book of his own just out: *Books that Saved My Life: Reading For Wisdom, Solace, and Pleasure* (Text Publishing), an astute, good-natured and sometimes idiosyncratic take on writers ranging from Joseph Conrad, Charlotte Brontë and Shakespeare to Nelson Mandela and J.K. Rowling.

PUZZLES

PRIZE CROSSWORD No. 671 | Alanus



Across

- 7 Poor church creatures with a vestment for the priest (5)
- 8 Opening around 5 with biblical reference for dance (7)
- 10 Better mix with Duke first giving name to exclusive reference book (7)
- 11 King takes return route concerned about kidney condition (5)
- 12 Over us name is rewritten in preparations for large-scale battle (10)
- 16 More direct approach when forged by rage and thirst (10)
- 20 & 1 Down: (5,5) Maud and Zarah with a link to Lord of the Zoroastrians (5,5)
- 21 European after change of law became first P.M. (7)

- 23 Praised over rejecting sin against the Holy Ghost (7)
- 24 My French alien artist (5)

Down

- 1 See 20 Across
- 2 Broke rib in US state whereby Tyburn martyr St Luke recalled (5)
- 3 Repeat directions for river near Peterborough Cathedral (4)
- 4 Odd headwear in the past identifying early pope (6)
- 5 True result of musical prelude (8)
- 6 Ross with ten who were involved in killing protomartyr Stephen (7)
- 9 Native church example by isle off France (6)

- 13 Opening letters about centre in promotion of brother of David (8)
- 14 Northumbrian saint put about was old but only 38 when killed (6)
- 15 Annoy saint back in Britain from city in Siberia (7)
- 17 Martyr St Philip returning note about conflict in Arundel (6)
- 18 Cleric and poet completed his metaphysical work we hear (5)
- 19 Holy man in charge of Shakespearean fool (5)
- 22 Extraordinary post associated with St Rose (4)

Please send your answers to: Crossword Competition 17-24 August, The Tablet, 1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY. Email: thetablet@thetablet.co.uk, with Crossword in the subject field. Please include your full name, telephone number and email address, and a mailing address. Three books – on Jesus, Christian Art and Catholicism – from the OUP's Very Short Introduction series on Friday 30 August. The answers to this week's puzzles and the crossword winner's name will appear in the 7 September issue.

SUDOKU | Tough

	2			5		7	
		4		7		3	
	7		9	1		8	4
4						7	
3			1	9			6
		7					8
2		5		9	1		8
	4		5			3	
	6		7				9

Each 3x3 box, each row and each column must contain all the numbers 1 to 9.

1	2	6	7	4	8	3	5	9
8	7	4	5	3	9	1	2	6
3	9	5	6	1	2	4	7	8
9	5	2	1	7	3	6	8	4
4	1	3	8	5	6	2	9	7
6	8	7	2	9	4	5	1	3
5	6	9	4	8	1	7	3	2
2	3	1	9	6	7	8	4	5
7	4	8	3	2	5	9	6	1

Solution to the 27 July puzzle

Solution to the 27 July crossword No. 668

- Across:** 7 Boyce; 8 Utility; 10 Exogamy; 11 Virgo; 12 Carnoustie; 16 Heterodoxy; 20 Skull; 21 Casuist; 23 Stimuli; 24 Xebec.
Down: 1 Abbey; 2 Byron; 3 Deva; 4 Bunyan; 5 Rievaulx; 6 Vibrato; 9 Yeomen; 13 Aurelius; 14 Rhesus; 15 Etruria; 17 Duccio; 18 Nimbi; 19 Stock 22 Sext; 21 Ember. **Winner:** Maurice Clint, of Belfast.

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